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A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Social Media's Approach to Comfort Food

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Abstract

My thesis essentially explores the ways social media reveals subconscious connections to food. Research indicates that there is an existing connection between food consumption and nostalgia, which transports a person back to their childhood and its association with comfort. This concept of nostalgia helps us understand how people in their everyday lives share their personal comforts with the general public, and how the general public responds. To explore this phenomenon I conduct primary research in the form of collecting and analyzing Instagram posts relating to comfort food, using the hashtags #comfortfood, #nostalgia, and #foodnostalgia. I use this research to identify common themes in the way Instagram users relate food, nostalgia, and comfort. In particular, I analyze the connection of users and memories, users' reactions to the uncontrollable stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, and comfort foods with/without nostalgia. By understanding how people associate their emotions with the food they eat, food's presence on social media can be viewed as more than a basic building block for survival, and instead show an insight into someone's way to self-comfort or to comfort others without conscious realization.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Social Media's Approach to Comfort Food

It's Thanksgiving, something that Americans celebrate every year, a day focused on food and family. Thinking back, the years blend together—the same food, the same people, the same warm, happy feeling. Now, imagine a day when you are feeling lonely, no family or friends around, and it's time for dinner; what do you choose to eat? Ironically, that day has occurred all over the world for months now as people were pushed inside in the midst of a global pandemic. You might think that the decision of what you cook while feeling lonely is a random one, but what you didn't know is that the food you ate as a child, with your family when you felt that joy and connectedness, made the decision for you. By studying and understanding how people associate their emotions with the food they eat, foods presence on social media platforms can be evolve from a basic building block for survival and instead show an insight into someone's way to self-comfort or comfort other without conscious realization.

Social medias presence has grown into a phenomenon that allows people from every part of the world connect like never before. Sharing images of food has gained popularity over the years as well, causing some to be less than pleased with the trend. As a pastry student, seeing food on social media was a new platform for inspiration and growth, but I knew not everyone viewed it as such. Food, if viewed solely as a need for survival, lacks the imagination and passion that most people subconsciously associate with it. Combining a person's comfort food, with nostalgia, on only a social media level allowed a deeper level of insight than most people would reveal in person. The food a person eats when they are a child, especially the emotional connection to the person cooking the food or tradition of the food itself, guides their food choices for their entire lives.

The main role of this scholarly research will be a combination of familiarizing the reader with the topic, so they completely understand the known link between food consumption

and nostalgia and then taking them with me into seeing that link throughout social media in analyzing how real people's lives and posts connect and support the research. The existing research is the basis of my personal research to demonstrate what has been found on a scholarly level and applying it onto a personal level. For example, it was not until I completed a short project on the topic and read someone's personal recollection of how nostalgia effected their food choices when they sought comfort that it clicked in my own mind. Once I had read the connection of the research to someone's personal life, I understood the actual link in my own life. For example, when thinking of my own food history, I grew up in an Italian family and my comfort food usually reflects that—whether it's lasagna, meatballs, or candied yams—it's what I didn't realize I connected my comforts to. I connect lasagna as a comfort food because my father always made it for dinner when he wouldn't work; meatballs make me feel secure because my grandmother makes them for me whenever I visit; candied yams are made every year for Easter, making me feel as though I'm surrounded by my family. It was not until I researched in depth about how specific someone's nostalgia with food could be, that it clicked for me.

The groundwork is well laid out, showing there is a scientific link between the food a person chooses and the foods they ate during their childhood. But I want to see if social media has revolutionized the way people share their comforts with the world. A century ago, a person's ability to share their comfort foods included verbal and limited written communication. With the increasingly innovative world of technology, the way humans communicate is new and ever changing; with it is the way we share our comforts. Social media opened up the ability to communicate world-wide without leaving the comfort of their homes. Now, in a time where humans have to stay in their own homes for their safety how are their comforts being shared? This thesis will look at how comfort foods are shared on

social media platforms and how, in a time where the world must stay six feet apart, people feel closer than ever.

Scholarly Conversation

The concept of nostalgia, meaning “homesickness from a geographical distance”, has been around for centuries and can be dated back to the Ancient Greeks, (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014). Over the centuries the definition changed from homesickness by a geographical distance, to the clinical description equating to a psychopathological disorder, by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, finally deciding on the modern-day definition of a yearning for yesterday (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014; Beck, 2013). Food consumption is often linked to taking people back to their past, but there is not a lot of research on the connection between nostalgia and food consumption.

Positive Food Memories

The most common theme throughout my research on nostalgia and its effects on food choices is the positive impact of memories on consumption preferences. Vignolles and Pichon (2014) completed a study in which 300 people aged 16 to 64, half men, half women, were asked to complete a questionnaire with one question about a nostalgic experience and the next a food-specific nostalgic experience. The data stated that 51% of the food specific nostalgic experiences were from a positive memory, or emotions similar to joy, happiness, or peace (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014). Nostalgia triggers emotions from an event in the past that are transferred into inanimate objects, sounds, odors, or tastes that were present when the emotions were first experienced (Hirsch, 1992; Holbrook, 1993; Vignolles & Pichon, 2014). The feelings of nostalgia, in the sense known today (emotions a person had at a certain moment in time) are linked to a memory when they felt that specific emotion (Hirsch, 1992).

This is especially apparent within the concept of comfort food. A person associates a type of food with what they ate when they were younger, when they felt secure.

Subsequently this experience is projected onto the food itself, making the food the object of safety and security. The best examples of positive food nostalgia come from a variety of people and sources, showing the span of one's memory and the similarities of experiences between unrelated people. In part of Monturo's study (2005), a senior nurse scientist with Penn Medicine and professor of nursing at West Chester University, she looks at the feelings toward food by aging veterans. The results fell into two categories "eating to live" and "living to eat." A man named Lou talked about his favorite food from childhood, a Double German Chocolate cake, specifically made by his mother. He reminisces about the cake, and from the words he says and the smile on his face, he shows the emotional connection to the memory and the cake itself. Similarly, in Vignolles and Pichon's study a participant shows positive food nostalgia through seeing Balisto chocolate bars in the grocery store and immediately being transported back to elementary school and the "sweet memories of innocence and relying on my parents" (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014).

The positive memories are not limited to the food itself; it goes as far as the packaging or presentation of the food. In recent times, some food companies are re-launching popular food products with previous packaging. For example, General Mills uses the same corn flex recipe as they traditionally have, but Americans might still insist that they are not the same as when they ate them as a child. Marketers have realized the influence of nostalgia and relaunched cereals with their old packaging to bring back the "old and valuable times" (Varnali, 2016).

Negative Food Memories

On the opposite side of the food-evoked memories are the negative food impacts, the bitter moments from the past that are linked with anger and sadness (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014). In Vignolles and Pichon's study (2014), 16% of people answered the questionnaire with a negative food nostalgia story. Both anger and sadness are present in Monturo's study (2005) within "eating to live", the common theme from the veterans during a difficult socioeconomic time or in association with a chronic illness. Some of the participants with illnesses that changed their diet spoke of their previous eating habits with "smiles, laughs, and a brighter appearance" (as cited in Monturo, 2005). Another participant, Steve, spoke of the food he associated with his childhood, which was during the Great Depression: "Back in my days, you're lucky to have mush. People used to walk the street and beg for an onion" (as cited in Monturo, 2005). This same feeling of sadness can also be linked to yearning for the tastes of the past and they are no longer available. Denise speaks of flan from her childhood, "I am nostalgic of the taste of the old. When I eat one today, I feel disgusted, fed up because it no longer tastes the same" (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014).

Scent-Induced Nostalgia

Similar to the evoking of memories based on food or vice versa, nostalgic memories can also be brought forward with the sense of smell, a phenomenon referred to as olfactory-evoked recall. The nose is directly connected to the olfactory lobe in the brain, which is considered the area of the emotions: therefore the sense of smell has the most powerful impact on emotions (Hirsch, 1992; Waskul, Vannini & Wilson, 2009). Examples of successful olfactory-evoked responses are releasing the scent of freshly baked bread in a supermarket, increased bakery sales by 300 percent, movie theaters smell of popcorn in the lobby, the scent of chocolate chip cookies walking by a bakery.

Different scents mean different things to each individual person. The scent of one's childhood differs depending on where home was for them. Hirsch found that baked goods are the most common scent of olfactory evoked responses, but specific scents can trigger specific memories (Hirsch 1992; Waskul, Vannini & Wilson, 2009). For residents of each area of the country a different scent felt like their childhood: the east coast cited fresh flowers, the west coast, meat and barbecuing, the south, fresh air, and the Midwest, farm animals. Scent plays an important role in transporting the feelings a person once felt to their present self, emulating the situation in their memory (Waskul, Vannini & Wilson, 2009). The nostalgia concept carries through to include scent-induced nostalgia where people, places, objects or circumstances that are in the past are brought back because of a feeling (Hirsch, 1992; Holbrook, 1993; Vignolles & Pichon, 2014; Waskul, Vannini & Wilson, 2009).

Food in Social Media

Social media connects people through stories, images, and experiences. Food has taken a front row seat in the growing popularity of social media, whether it is marketing, critiques, or imitation (Alexander, 2014; Rousseau, 2016). Social media's exponential popularity growth in recent years has led to polarizing opinions. Chefs have taken a stance against the growing trend of diners photographing their meals in their restaurants. Diners might view sharing their meal as a thank you to the chef, showing appreciation, but many chefs now see this as an insult to their art (Alexander, 2014). The increasing number of people attempting to get that perfect picture to capture their experience at high end restaurant comes with a price. Alexandre Gauthier, a chef in France, cited that his customers have taken multiple flash pictures, repositioned their tables, and worried about posting them to social media while leaving the food that has been so carefully prepared and timed, to sit and get cold. Gauthier's goal is to limit the use of photography not only to keep the surprise for future guests, but to allow his customers to experience the meal as it was

imagined. Another chef in Paris, David Toutain, sees social media as an aid to him and his cause. It helped him at the start of his career when he opened his restaurant, and he views it as his advertising (Alexander, 2014).

Methods and Data

In lieu of a cross-sectional study to find the answers to questions about comfort food; I decided to turn to the internet for data collection and to see the widespread connection between users that may be in different geographic locations through food. As a revolutionary new way to communicate throughout the world, social media is used by 91% of smart phone users between 18-29 years, with 55% of those 50 years and older (Pittman & Reich, 2016). With so many people using social media, it allowed me to achieve a level of research that is not possible through traditional interviewing with a local convenience sample. Because of social media, I could see not just a person's idea, and in some cases, explanation of their comfort food; but it also allowed me to see other users' interactions with the comfort food.

Instagram

Instagram, unlike its popular counterparts: Facebook and Twitter, requires an image as the post in order to be shared. Social media users vary on their levels of engagement, which is researched on its own, but a large number of users do not directly interact with social media content in a measurable way, like "likes" or "comments", but still absorb the content created by fellow users. In terms of business marketing, businesses present on Instagram have 58 times higher engagement per follower than on Facebook (Hellberg, 2015). Visuals allows users to understand the content better, with over 90% of information processed daily originating from visual receptors, 80% of retained information from what they see, and only 20% from information read (Manic, 2015). Knowing the interaction between the brain and visual information, I used the form of social media that solely relied

on visual engagement: Instagram. While photos are shared on other platforms, Instagram's requirement for imagery allowed a constant variable throughout my research.

Methodology

Utilizing the hashtag symbol, #, the user creates a word or phrase that then distinguishes their post on social media that can then be searched for using the hashtag. The use of hashtags by social media users enabled me to sort through the vast number of posts on Instagram to match with my criteria (Herrera-Viedma, 2015). Using the existing categorical system, I narrowed down my searches by using three popular keywords related to my topic—comfortfood, foodnostalgia, nostalgia—with over 6.9 million, one thousand, and 11.5 million posts, respectively. Using the search function within the app, I searched posts for each hashtag and saw a wide variety of posts that were then broken down again into two categories: Top and Recent. This additional subcategory, it divided the posts into those that had the most engagement, through likes and comments, and the posts that were shared most recently. Posts in the subcategories were not mutually exclusive, but with over a combined 18.5 million posts I rarely searched long enough to be able to find the top posts within the most recent subcategory. I looked through both sub-categories for each tag, rotating the tag categories every three days for two weeks to search only one daily. This allowed me to focus on each tag individually, while still collecting an assortment of data.

To analyze the photographs as I researched, I used similar guidelines to Photovoice, a research method that analyzes photos taken by the researcher. Although Photovoice relies on group discussion to contextualize and categorize the selected photographs, my research was broken down only by myself as the sole researcher. Photovoice uses three stages to discuss the images: first, participants choose one or two photographs they prefer or are the most significant; second, the participants outline stories based on the acronym SHOWeD; lastly, they codify the issues and themes that arise from their photographs

(Wang, 1999). Using the SHOWeD acronym gives participants five questions to guide through the analysis of each image:

What do you **S**ee here?

What is really **H**appening here?

How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?

What can we **D**o about it?

My research, unlike traditional Photovoice, focuses on images gathered on social media rather than taken by its direct participants and analyzed by the respective photographers (Wang, 1999). Inspired by the Photovoice research design, my research was still too broad to obtain a necessary number of images to analyze, so I used further criteria to find posts within searching that would aide my research in substantial ways. Because I did not have access to a data-mining machine or application, I had to create criteria that I would then follow while scrolling through the posts to decide what would be included. While Instagram already narrows down the type of data to only posts including a visual, not all posts included a visual of food. Because of my topic, my first criteria was a requirement to have food in the photograph with no restrictions on the level of photography. Some photographs casually captured a moment in someone's personal life or a staged image that still conveyed a comforting food. Requiring photographs, however, did not guarantee that the photos included explanatory text, so that became the second criteria. I also disqualified almost all posts that were marketing recipes to users. Because of this, I tried to stay away from posts that were solely focused on marketing the food to the public. A few posts were from a professional but didn't see marketing as their primary goal, giving explanatory text similar to the others. The next criteria to include posts in the data focused on language. Since Instagram is able to translate the text in a post, I was able to read different languages,

therefore geographically expanding my sample size. Another criterion I used was to not view the engagement as a factor on the validity of the comfort food. Instead, I used the comments section as another source of data to see the interaction of other users with the user's idea of comfort food, whether it was personally associating with the comfort food or a general interest in the food. With these thoughts in mind, I used the following questions to help me decide on posts that aided in my research, while adding to the conversation of comfort food:

Does this image include food?

Was this image staged or capturing an authentic moment?

Is this image being used as a marketing tactic?

Does this post include any explanatory text?

What level of engagement is present?

Whereas Photovoice chooses images without a qualitative basis and then uses the guidelines after the fact to analyze, my guidelines were used in both obtaining and analyzing my research. The guidelines I created assisted in choosing which images to include and allowed me to establish the depth behind the image or whether it was a picture of a non-identifiable food.

Analysis

By researching such a broad spectrum of data, with only a few constraints, I was able to find multiple trends present throughout my data with some overlapping commonalities. While I found some connection between a smaller amount of posts, I focused on the most popular trends with the most supporting data. An unexpected turn in my data collection was the ability to analyze the unexpected, uncontrollable circumstances affecting one's craving for comfort food due to the rising COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, I thought I would only find similarities between comfort foods based on

geographic locations and ancestry; however due to the pandemic, and the growing need to cook at home, a lot of the individual posts I found fell under an overarching theme of needing extra comfort in a time of stress. Throughout my research I saw visible trends including similar sub textual messages and themes, connection of a singular person to the discussed food, connection to childhood memories, and mutual connections to a comfort food from a location.

In addition to the subtle differences found in the relationship between comfort food and nostalgia, I found multiple themes present throughout all the posts analyzed. The most prominent theme present, due to the time researching in April 2020, was the collective yearning for comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic. The other two themes I chose to focus on stemmed from the scholarly conversation that already exists on the topic, specifically the connection of nostalgic foods to a singular person or memory and the significance of both.

Trend I: Comfort Food versus Nostalgia

During the literature review portion of this thesis, I learned of the connection between childhood experiences with a person's memory and how memories involving food could be easily triggered later in life with a few similar details (Hirsch, 1992). What I realize now is that while there is a connection between one's comfort food and their memories, comfort food does not have to involve a memory to give a person comfort. This distinction was a large portion of what my research taught me and looking further into what specific people said in their posts framed the situation even further. There are people who have comfort foods that have no relationship to their past and there are also people whose nostalgic foods have no presence in their current life, but between the both of them are the people whose current comfort foods are linked to a memory when they were younger. My initial understanding of comfort food was a two-dimensional version of what I found in my

research. Nostalgic comfort foods present a different depth that a non-nostalgic comfort food might not have.

Comfort Foods without Nostalgia. Comfort food refers to a food that fulfills the need for both emotional and physical needs. Research has shown that the need to avoid loneliness causes people to turn to social surrogates, not necessarily in the traditional sense, and comfort food serves as a social surrogate to most people (Troisi & Gabriel, 2010). Existing research draws the connection between current comfort foods and memories, as in a favorite food, family or cultural tradition, or significant reminder of the past or home; my research supported existing research but also showed that the emotional connection to the food was not necessary. One post depicted a casserole dish of scalloped potatoes (Figure 1) describing it as “pure comfort food”, but nowhere in his post did he associate the dish with any existing memory (Daniel, 2020).

Figure 1



Note. Scalloped Potatoes posted by Daniel

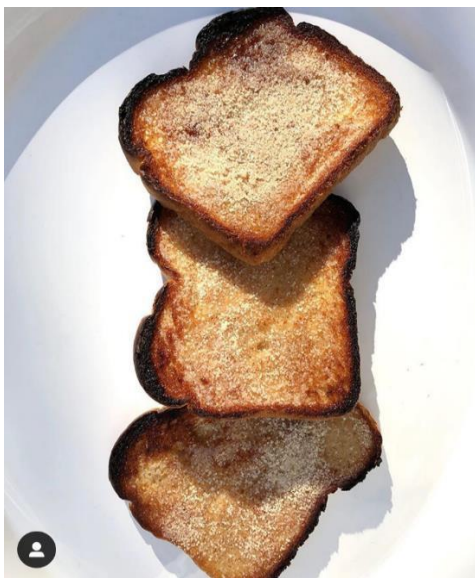
Another user cited an image of ziti with broccoli and cheese as her comfort during the quarantine, also with no emotional connection to the dish (Forte, 2020). A similarity between the comfort foods lacking an emotional connection stemmed from the substance of the food itself. None of the posts studied included traditionally “healthy” foods as comforting; what I

found was mostly carbohydrate based, rich, fatty, foods. Corsica and Spring (2008), researched the link between the craving for a carbohydrate over a protein-rich balanced nutrient. Not only did participants choose the carbohydrate option when in a “dysphoric state,” but the carbohydrate also acted as a significantly better antidepressant than the protein-rich beverage (Corsica & Spring, 2008).

Approaching my data with this new perspective, it was apparent that the makeup of comfort foods is more likely to be a carbohydrate-based food than protein or plant-based foods. Because the purpose of comfort foods is to improve a person’s mood at that point in time, choosing a carbohydrate-rich food such as pasta, potatoes or dessert is natural

Comfort Foods with Nostalgia. While this connection opened my understanding for comfort foods even more than expected, the association of a food with a specific memory in addition to the makeup of the food made for an effective comfort food. An example of a popular comfort food that was nostalgic for more than just the user who posted the image (Figure 2), is cinnamon toast (Thompson, 2020). It not only reminded the user of her childhood, but it also served as her simple comfort food during the pandemic quarantine.

Figure 2



Note. Cinnamon toast posted by Thompson

Cinnamon toast is one of the simplest comfort foods I found during research, consisting of toasted bread that is spread with butter and topped with a sprinkle of cinnamon sugar when fresh out of the toaster; from a scientific perspective, it is also a carbohydrate-rich food. One of the surprising insights in this post was the public engagement and the social relevance cinnamon toast to many followers. Multiple users commented citing cinnamon toast as their childhood favorite, and with the reminder from Thompson's post, they indulged themselves with a nostalgic comfort food (GCC, personal communication, April 2020; A. Pierce, personal communication, April 2020).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, a trend found throughout the nostalgic foods was the need to continue the tradition with another generation. A user shared her connection with Kaju Kishmish ice cream, an Indian ice cream with cashews, raisins, and cardamom (Figure 3). She went into detail about the memories she had of eating the ice cream out of cardboard cups when she was a child, while sitting under a kumquat tree in her grandmother's yard, and the distinct feeling of picking out the raisins using her fingers then transitioning into using the wooden spoon (Tanvi, 2019).

Figure 3



Note. Kaju Kishmish Ice Cream posted by Tanvi

Tanvi went a step further than other users, when she shared that she makes this ice cream for her children. The sentiment of carrying on the tradition rang true through multiple nostalgic food posts, including ones referring to banana cream pie and cinnamon toast (Thompson, 2020; Justin & Amy, 2020).

Cultural Identity. Another important connection made by users is that their comfort food as a traditional food from their culture. Existing research demonstrates that comfort foods derive from experiences with the food in which a person is transported back to what they felt when they first consumed the food (Hirsch, 1992). While these posts were not explicitly framed as nostalgic foods from their childhoods, the types of foods are similar to the person's ancestry. One user took comfort in food traditionally prepared where they live in the south-eastern United States, barbeque chicken, greens, macaroni and cheese, and cornbread, all staples of the culture in that area of the country (Spain-Cowart, 2020).

In many cultures, the types of foods consumed are typically similar in their base ingredients, for example, pastas in Italian cooking, spices in Indian cooking, and potatoes in Irish cooking (White, 1973). One user reinvented one of her favorite Lao comfort foods, Thom Kem, a caramelized pork stew, into a dish inspired by a familiar flavor profile (Sourinho, 2020). Many of the users with posts showcasing Indian dishes did not eat these dishes as children, but the elements of their childhood translate into their cooking in present day. The presence of certain elements and flavors provide the familiarity for the person consuming the dish, without being an exact recreation of a specific dish.

Trend II: COVID-19 Pandemic

At a point in time when a majority of the world is advised to stay inside and follow social distancing guidelines; there is little of the social interaction that people rely on as comfort. As stated earlier, when experiencing loneliness in any form people turn to social surrogates, and when people are unable to experience most of their traditional forms of

social surrogacy, they've turned to food (Troisi & Gabriel, 2010). The unexpected turn of events in the world during my data collection exposed a different level of research that, without these circumstances, I would never have found to analyze. Coronavirus spread across the world at the beginning of 2020, quickly rising to a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (Ducharme, 2020). Due to the nature of the virus, social distancing guidelines pushed most people indoors with a lack of social interaction, causing an effect on the physical and mental health of many and "a world that, for many, is an increasingly anxious, unhappy and lonely" (Scott, 2020, para. 2).

The presence of virus-related posts on social media was not surprising given that many people's lives were now paused amid stay at home guidelines. To my surprise, a number of Instagram posts that I had collected for research referenced the virus in more than one way. Popular cooking trends emerged on social media, including a substantial increase in home cooking; a study found that 54 percent of respondents said that they cook more than before the pandemic (Taparia, 2020). With the increase in home cooking came direct references to the virus in comfort food Instagram posts. Of the 75 posts I collected, 73% were posted since the WHO declared the virus a global pandemic on March 11th (Ducharme, 2020). Of the 55 posts, 58%, included a direct reference to the virus or stay at home orders. To achieve the cleanest results, I excluded any posts from the count that insinuated conditions of the virus, and only included those that explicitly referenced the virus, quarantine, stay at home orders, etc.

Included in the count were posts like one from Davy Khy, who showcased their coconut turmeric chicken soup (Figure 4).

Figure 4



Note. Coconut Turmeric Soup posted by Khy

Their caption beings, “Right now, all I want is comfort food. My little comforts mean so much more to me now than ever” (Khy, 2020). This user not only shared their comfort food during her quarantine, but also uses the social media outlet as a way to express their feelings while stuck inside. They reference feeling an abundance of emotions, and suffering from an anxiety attack, while still knowing there are people in the world that have it worse than them (Khy, 2020).

showing chronic stress causes high cortisol output followed by intake of “comfort food”, they studied women’s body mass index and their stress levels. They concluded that the highly stressed women reported greater eating in response to their stress, and as the women gained more weight, they reported less levels of stress (Tomiya et al., 2012).

When considering the work of the combined researchers in conjunction with the number of posts found that reference the newfound stress and social isolation, I found that a person’s reaction during this time to turn to comforting foods is expected. The outside stressors of the stay-at-home measures coupled with an uncertain world are leading people to turn to foods, as Tomiya et al (2012) demonstrated. Instead of making unfamiliar foods, people are making foods that they have previously eaten, as theorized by Hirsch, Holbrook, and Vignolles and Pichon (1992; 1993; 2014). Those familiar foods are acting as their comfort and social surrogate, as stated in Troisi and Gabriel’s research (2011), giving the consumer the feeling they had when they first ate that food (Hirsch’s 2010; 1992).

In the middle of this rare world-wide event, people are leaning on each other like never before. To expand the research revolving around the pandemic, I zoomed back out to look at social media without the focus on comfort foods and saw how often individuals are changing everyone for the better. One of the first series of posts I found, due to my personal love for the chef, was Christina Tosi, a James Beard award-winning pastry chef known for her brand MilkBar. Tosi started her quarantine at the beginning of April with a daily live baking club for her followers to join in and be able to bake with the renowned chef from the comfort of their own homes. Each afternoon she posts a picture to her Instagram page of the ingredients needed for the next day’s baking club, where she energetically interacts with her followers, helping them figure out substitutions during the COVID food shortages (Hoover-Greenway, 2020). Then every day, like clockwork, Tosi tunes in at 2 pm welcoming her followers in the only way she knows: using all the joy in the world. Greeting followers

daily is the image of Tosi dancing around her kitchen with beloved dog, Butter, as she welcomes users with positive affirmations and shameless singing. The lack of social interactions, especially happy, energetic social interactions, has affected the global community for the worse, but with social media personalities like Tosi are filling that void with the best medicine: food. The effort of a world-renowned pastry chef to take the time to make the world smile in the middle of a pandemic, and through social media, is an incredible feat. Tosi reminds her followers daily that in baking club everything doesn't have to be perfect, as she happily bounces through her kitchen, bringing a feeling of belonging and that everything is going to turn out okay (Hoover Greenway, 2020).

Famous chefs are bringing their knowledge to a public forum and connecting with the everyday person on a much more personal level. In March, Ina Garten posted a picture of her Belgian waffles she cooked for herself and husband, Jeffrey (Gilbert, 2020). The response to Garten's post was "like a nuclear reaction" with followers sending love and best wishes to the famous couple, wishing they could quarantine with the Barefoot Contessa (Garten, 2020 as cited in Gilbert, 2020). Garten took the opportunity to tailor her posts to the situation at hand, offering expert advice while sharing happiness and strength. The celebrity chef has taken a personal approach to her fans, offering advice and balance during an unfamiliar time (Gilbert, 2020).

Trend III: Connection to a Single Person

A trend I expected to find before starting the research process was personal connections to a single person through the comfort food. This hunch was supported by research that comfort foods tend to be favorite foods from childhood, or otherwise linked to a specific person, place, or time, giving the consumer a positive association with the food (Spence, 2017). Many posts that referred to a specific person in the memory typically associated the food with the person other than the person with the food. The food was a

part of their former self, and sentiment that the food is not the same without said person. One person recollected her mother, who is no longer alive, and her recipe for chicken curry. The user expressed not only the happiness from eating their mother's recipe, but simultaneously showed remorse for never learning the recipe from her while she was still alive (A., 2020). Obtaining the recipe through the phone from an aunt and then cooking the family recipe, she took comfort in "the familiar aroma that filled my kitchen. [they] were elate" (A., 2020). Throughout the process of making this dish this user had the feeling of comfort that they associated with their mother the entire time.

Figure 6



Note. Chicken Curry posted by A.

Another user remembers their grandmother and her Zimbabwean cornbread, Chimodho. The user had to adapt their grandmother's original recipe which called for her to bake it in an underground oven, made by her digging a hole in the ground. The authenticity might not be the same as what the user was used to growing up, but they adapted and were "transported...to her kitchen in Zimbabwe" (@plantbased_africa, 2020).

Figure 7



Note. Chimodho posted by @plantbased_africa

Some posts are simpler in remembering the person that inspired their food. One user shares that pancakes remind them of their grandmother when they were "wee" (@gemsgrub, 2020).

During the research into foods that users associated with a singular person, a trend appeared. With 75 posts in total, 20 included an association of a person to their comfort food; 18 out of the 20 posts reference a mother figure. The clear majority of the motherly references were to the user's actual mother, with only a few associated with a grandmother or close aunt; only one referenced a mother figure, and the user addressed her as their "second mom" (Ondrick, 2020). In a similar study of aging veterans' feelings towards food, Monturo also identifies that mothers were the most referenced family members (2005). In this type of research, I was unable to ask the participants about their personal relationship

with their identified motherly figure, but based on additional research it is shown that children with a secure attachment to their mother display an increased ability to adapt under stress (Movahed Abtahi & Kerns, 2017). With the supplementary research, it demonstrates the additional emotional stability provided from a mother, and associating a comfort food with a mother is only aiding in the person's comfort. In a study based on the food items brought to class by 264 undergraduate students at a southeastern United States university, the researchers classified the comfort foods and analyzed the recollections (Locher et. al, 2006). This study also found that many participants chose to consume certain foods because they evoked the feelings of being cared for by their mothers. One of the main ways women, especially in a motherly role, show their care for a person is by feeding them; consuming a food connected with a motherly figure allows the feelings of being cared for to be re-lived (Locher et. al, 2006).

Trend IV: Connection based on Geographical Location

An unexpected piece of data that occurred a few times throughout my research was a communal comfort food based on a geographic location. One post depicted a homestyle banana pudding, using boxed vanilla pudding, vanilla wafer cookies and store-bought whipped topping (Justin & Amy, 2020). In the initial post, the user shares that the dish was unheard of in their new home in the North-Western United States, but it was traditionally and frequently prepared in the South-Eastern part of the country

Figure 8



Note. Banana Pudding posted by Justin & Amy

Followers eagerly agreed with the post, saying that their mothers had made the pudding during their childhood, because she was from eastern Tennessee (Wallen, S., personal communication, April 2020). Another user joined the conversation and added that the banana pudding pictured is also their comfort food, and they live in South Carolina (H., Joni, personal communication, April 2020). A third user shows that they are familiar with the banana pudding and asks if there really are people who have not heard of the dish (@mphsbell71, personal communication, April 2020).

Trend V: Connection to a Memory

The final theme I identified while researching was the association of a food with a singular memory, typically a very simple memory from childhood. One post in particular illustrated the user's memory so well that it transports the reader to the farm stand on the side of the Northern Californian roads. This user chose an unconventional nostalgic food, blueberries, but only from the farm stands they grew up with that were located on the side of the road, with food straight from the farms.

Figure 9



Note. Blueberry Stand posted by Caroff

They recollect the feelings experienced when trying to see over the counter when they were young, and the women who worked the stand showing affection and gifting the young user with a piece of fresh fruit (Caroff, 2018). The intense emotional connection to a simple farm stand continued into adulthood and “wide-eyed wonder and excitement of girlhood still floods through me at moments like this” when they see the first blueberries of the season (Caroff, 2018). The user has an emotional connection to blueberries, but the emotional connection is with the experience and specific memories or the farm stands, and not strictly with the blueberries. Another user associated an emotional memory with picking fresh berries on their aunt's farm; they would travel to the farm during school holidays. Venturing

into the field with an ice cream container to fill every day while there and “gorge [their] little belly with them”, demonstrates the emotional connection, not to the berries themselves, but to the act of picking them fresh on their aunt’s farm during childhood (Rachel & Kara, 2017). One of the unconventional memories found was a connection to Lucky Charms cereal; this user used to “plan [their] “date” with this cereal in advance”, the user would slip into the kitchen in the middle of the night to eat a bowl of the cereal (Marlow, 2017). While Lucky Charms served as a comfort for this user, they associated the cereal with the memory of eating in secret during the night. For health reasons, the user stopped eating the cereal after childhood but later found substitutes, as an adult, to recreate the experience causing an overwhelming nostalgic experience (Marlow, 2017).

Figure 10



Note. “Lucky Charms” posted by Marlow

The comfort foods associated with memories demonstrate how the users are choosing experiences when they felt safe, loved, and happy. Whether it is at a farm stand on the side of the road, a field on a family member’s farm, or the kitchen in the middle of the night, all the experiences share their feelings. The association with memories connect with the existing scholarly data stating that people transfer the emotions they felt in the past to

the inanimate objects, sounds, odors, or tastes that were present; which makes up the memory itself (Hirsch, 1992; Holbrook, 1993; Vignolles & Pichon, 2014).

Word Cloud Analysis

As a way to assess the data from a quantitative and visual perspective, I created two word clouds. One was created using the hashtags, in full, from the 75 posts used as research data to view any similarities other than the tags used to find the posts: comfortfood, nostalgia, and foodnostalgia. The second word cloud was created using the captions, in full, from the 75 posts used as research data. Analysis showed the overlap in emotions, sentiments, and connections made in the individual posts. Since the word clouds could only be generated after the research was done in full, I used them as a confirmation or rejection of my findings set by my research guidelines before starting.

Hashtag Word Cloud

For the hashtag word cloud, I scanned each post and directly copied the hashtags used into a single document, including any hashtags used within the text itself to replace a term into hashtag form. Compiling the hashtags yielded over 1200 in total, which were then inputted into a word cloud generator which showed there were 857 unique hashtags used. The three terms used for search purposes were discarded from the word cloud to show the similarities excluding the search criteria. This word cloud showed that the top five hashtags used in all 75 posts from most used to least used were: food, foodphotography, foodporn, homemade, and homecooking.

Figure 11



As expected, the top two tags in the post to involve food, and since all posts included food in the picture, it was also identified with food photography. The most common hashtag after food and food photography was surprisingly foodporn, a phrase that has grown in popularity on social media in recent years. The first use of the term “food porn” was in 1979 when the cofounder of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Michael Jacobson, coined two terms to describe healthy and unhealthy foods: “Right Stuff” and “Food Porn” (McBride, 2010). When later asked about the term, Jacobson explained that he created it to “connote a food that was so sensationally out of bounds of what a food should be that it deserved to be pornographic” (As cited by Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. E-mail correspondence, May 2009) Anne McBride (2010) researched the idea of “food porn” and its authenticity within the industry. The public presumably likes the term because it attracts a larger audience, and it is generally used to describe “mouthwatering images” in various publication methods (McBride, 2010). The idea of “food porn” describes the unachievable level of food through styling, lighting, and photography that a cook would never be able to replicate in the real world. In a forum with chefs and academics, Frederick Kaufman and Alan Madison led a discussion on “food porn” to see the professional views on the subject. In this discussion, Chris Cosentino, executive chef at Incanto, co-creator of Boccalone Salumeria, and television chef personality, identified “food porn” as a way to describe food by associating it with the Seven Deadly Sins, evoking feelings of gluttony and lust towards the food, therefore eliciting a “positive and euphoric reaction” (2010). Will Goldfarb, a pastry chef, and owner of WillPower and WillEquipped, took an opposite stand, refusing to define “food porn” as a term because they do not believe it exists (2010). Ray (2010) was unconvinced that the term was as widely used as described and stated that only academics and “those who mimic them” use the term as a way to commodify the food their photographing.

Food photography and styling require the correct equipment, tools, lighting, and expertise that is brought together to create the perfect picture, sometimes sacrificing accuracy for the perfect picture (Young, 2016). As I have been personally present at a food photography session, I know that the chef creating the foods photographed believed in having the most accurate rendition of their food photographed while still standing by the traditional ideas of getting the perfect picture. There must be a level of authenticity so that the image resembles the real-life product, but in order to get the perfect picture, the food had to be altered. The points of view from McBride's article and my personal, limited, knowledge give a new perspective on the term and the photographs it is used to describe. Looking with these additional lenses, most of the posts including the hashtag foodporn presented themselves as "beginner" photographs. While some of the more artistically staged photographs lacked the hashtag, this reinforces the idea that "food porn" is used only by academics and those who want to mimic them, with the professionals abstaining from the use of term.

Caption Word Cloud

For the word cloud created from the captions, I scanned each individual post and copied the text directly into a single document; excluding all hashtags and mentions of other users. Compiling all the captions yielded over 5,500 words in total, which were then inputted into a word cloud creator. While the word cloud creator already filters out common pronouns and verbs, like her, him, be, are, etc., for this application, the word cloud had to be filtered further to remove additional verbs, adverbs, and some adjectives.

Some of the words excluded include all, one, like, now, other; the words excluded did not take away any meaning but only narrowed the words used to nouns and adjectives that conveyed the feelings of the captions and posts. Because the use of comfort food, nostalgia, and food nostalgia within the captions was not a search tool they remained in the included words.

Using a word cloud allowed me to see the most commonly used words across all the posts researched, which included food, comfort, make, recipe, and made. Unsurprisingly, the use of the word *food* was the most common, which was the most used hashtag across the post as well. The first key conclusion made from the caption word cloud was the use of the words make, made and recipe. The use of these words conveys the idea that the foods that comfort the users are most likely cooked by them in their home. The caption word cloud also allowed me to see more of what kinds of food the users were eating, giving a narrower idea of what foods comforts them.

The themes of mentioning the emotional connection to a specific person or memory can also be confirmed with the caption word cloud. Some of the words used for relating to a specific person or persons include mom, dad, aunt, family, friends, and together. The use of these words in particular reinforces both the connection to a single person, and more specifically the connection.

The deeper level of research that was made available with the word cloud was the sentiment of the posts as a whole. Reading individual posts, a person can understand the emotional connection with the use of certain words but there's no way to compare multiple posts to each other. With the word cloud, the reader can compare the language used and see the most common emotions conveyed; the words used were safe, kind, fear, fun, hope, love, and happy. Vignolles and Pichon (2014) identify that 51% of people who experience food specific nostalgia have positive emotions similar to joy, happiness, and peace. The use

of words like safe and love not only convey the reader's feelings but give the reader an insight into how the user felt when they first consumed their comfort food.

Unlike the hashtag word cloud, the captions confirm the observations I made while researching. As stated earlier, the difference between comfort food and nostalgic comfort foods is based on memories, and most of the comfort food a person eats that isn't from their childhood fits into certain food categories (Corsica & Spring, 2008). While the research on carbohydrates acting as an antidepressant showed some insight into the relevance of the makeup of the foods, the comparison of the captions allowed for a clearer picture of what the sample of users viewed as comforting foods. Some of the foods mentioned were biscuits, pasta, pancakes, cookies, bread, and rice. In the cloud, it shows the use of comfort more than any of the mentions of nostalgia, memories, childhood, or stories therefore supporting the first observation of the different approaches to the use of comfort food was a substantial theme.

Conclusion

In a world where comfort foods have become vitally important, social media has allowed people to come closer as the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have forced them apart. This project started with the intent to find if and how social media affected the sharing of a person's comfort food. The existing professional research demonstrated the connection between comfort foods and nostalgia, but the additional research done for this thesis only reinforced the research in new ways. When a person is taken away from their family, friends, and jobs, they have instead turned to food and social media as a social surrogate. Whether it's baking banana bread, cookies, or sourdough, people have connected in an unforeseen way through social media (Marvar, 2020). One night a social media user posted as they baked banana bread, assuming they were the only one doing so. Comments

flooded in showing that while the user was alone in their apartment, they were not in fact alone (Marvar, 2020).

The results show fascinating directions for continued research into different areas. With the help of technology and special applications, a person could research deeper into the locations of posts and comments. Compiling all the geographic locations on a post, comments included, and translating that information onto a map could demonstrate not only how some foods comfort only a region of the world but also how far a post reaches into the void of social media. Continued research into the geographic aspects of this data set could uncover an additional level of depth that cannot be seen solely on the surface of the posts.

This research could also be used as a basis for the food service industry in menu development. By understanding what kind of dishes people seek out when needing comfort restaurants could better develop their menus to have comfort foods. Depending on the intended client base for a restaurant the research could help point the owners in a better direction for their clients. Imagining a scenario where an owner has no information about the area and intended clientele, understanding the comforts of the area or the culture could uncover dishes with popular potential that would otherwise remain unknown.

From a medical standpoint, some of the reactions in the COVID-19 section showed users experiencing feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression. Using the information on what people self-comfort with after feeling said emotions, the research could then be used in reverse to determine if comforting foods could prevent or minimize the emotions before they peak. This path may or may not prove fortuitous, but with increasing levels of stress and anxiety, research into the viability of a study would not negatively impact anything.

Social media users, and their posts opened a wider variety of participants than existing studies showing personal comfort foods and the interactions between users that never interact in person. They demonstrated that while a nostalgic connection is not always

necessary, comfort foods still remain predictable based on carbohydrate craving and antidepressant properties (Corsica & Spring, 2008). The word clouds confirmed the expectation of cultural trends within comfort foods with the mention of certain foods like rice, curry, pasta, and potatoes. Users showed their connection with their foods, sharing their emotions with a void of social media, allowing anyone to read, comment, and connect. The result of sharing ended with common themes showing that while the comfort food might be about an individual's taste, connecting the food to a person or a memory was a communal idea. Finally, with the surprise result of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on a person's stress levels and craving for comfort food, it was only made more apparent that comfort food brings the world emotionally closer, in a time when we have to physically stay apart.

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